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Recognizing the Global Nature of Environmental Problems

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Following is a statement by Frederick M. Bernthal, Assistant Secretary for Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, before the 15th session of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), Geneva, Switzerland, May 16, 1989.

A new generation of Americans has come to recognize more clearly than ever before the importance of our global environment and the need to husband the resources which nature has provided us. Many of you are aware of the high priority that President George Bush attaches to environmental issues.

Indeed, one of his first acts as President was the appointment of a career environmentalist, Mr. William Reilly, to head the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Mr. Reilly sends his regrets that urgent domestic issues prevented his joining you, as he had planned, at this important UNEP meeting.

The world now recognizes the global nature of environmental problems, the potential global consequences of each nation's actions: that air and water contamination do not honor national borders; that pesticides and the hazardous waste policy of each nation affects the environment of others; that the entire biosphere will feel the effects of global warming as well as the shrinking of our stratospheric ozone shield; that biological diversity is the gift of creation and our legacy to the future—that we share this life raft in the sea of space.

It was to foster dialogue and provide leadership on these issues that UNEP was created in 1972. UNEP is the catalyst that influences the international community to preserve the atmosphere, fresh water, the oceans and seashores, the soil, and precious biological diversity, and to protect our environment against the insults of hazardous wastes and toxic chemicals.

UNEP has provided indispensable leadership in the negotiation of key international agreements on protection of the ozone layer and transboundary shipments of hazardous waste. All those associated with negotiating the Vienna convention and its Montreal protocol, or more recently the Basel convention, deeply appreciate the efforts of Dr. Tolba and other members of the UNEP Secretariat in bringing those agreements to fruition.

We look forward to the important events scheduled between now and the second UN environmental conference in 1992, including the 1990 Bergen Conference and the second World Climate Conference. The United States is pleased to host this November the regional workshop on "Economics of Sustainable Development and the Environment."

Governing Council Decision 14/26, which expressed concern about the disappearance of plant and animal species and recognized the critical need for the protection and preservation of biological diversity, is of special interest to the United States. UNEP, with an important contribution from IUCN [International Union for the Conservation of Nature], is moving to focus the world's efforts in these areas.

The ad hoc working group of experts investigating the desirability and possible form of an umbrella convention on biological diversity is moving forward. This effort will lead to the harmonization of present agreements, plans, and organizations and develop new areas for action. The United States congratulates UNEP on its efforts to date in carrying out its biological diversity mandate.

But we cannot address the issues of biological diversity and deforestation without addressing the debt burden that many developing countries face. Our Treasury Secretary, Mr. Nicholas Brady, has called for an enhanced debt strategy that places greater emphasis on voluntary debt reduction, in agreement with commercial banks, as a complement to new lending. This could make an important contribution to resolving international debt problems by reducing new financing needs and by gradual reduction of existing debt.

UNEP's regional seas programs are important to sustainable world development, as they protect the marine environment, and implement global environment priorities through regional cooperation and through technical programs of organizations such as the IOC [Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission] and FAO [Food and Agri-

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culture Organization]. The United States is actively involved in these regional seas programs and strongly supports designation of ocean and coastal areas as a key element of UNEP's future agenda. Long-range regional marine action plans will enable these programs to be integrated into the global geoscience programs dealing with climate change.

UNEP's environmental assessment programs, in particular GEMS [Global Environmental Monitoring System], coordinated with other international organizations such as the WMO [World Meteorological Organization] and IOC, provide the international data base necessary for addressing regional and global environmental management problems. These issues include climate change, stratospheric ozone depletion, and coastal marine pollution.

The United States is particularly concerned about depletion of the stratospheric ozone layer, which shields us from the harmful ultraviolet rays of the sun. Recent scientific evidence, which has emerged since the Montreal protocol was adopted in September 1987, indicates that the protocol's control provisions may not be adequate to fully protect the stratospheric ozone layer. Accordingly, on March 3, President Bush announced that the United States will support an international phaseout, by the end of the century, of ozone-depleting substances controlled under the protocol, provided that safe substitutes are available. We are gratified that the recent Helsinki meetings and Prime Minister Thatcher's London conference on saving the ozone layer have moved in this direction.

Because CFCs [chlorofluorocarbons] act as greenhouse gases, absorbing infra-red heat radiation emitted from the earth's surface, stratospheric ozone depletion is closely related to the global climate change issue. While there are still significant uncertainties regarding the magnitude, timing, and regional effects of climate change, there is a growing consensus in the scientific community that significant global warming, due to anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases, is possible.

This is a problem which truly requires global cooperation. Efforts to reduce uncertainties about the science and effects of climate change should involve scientists from all nations. The sources and uses of greenhouse gases are virtually everywhere, and resolving this problem will require the cooperation of all nations. The United States welcomes the leadership shown by UNEP and WMO in the establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). This panel has become, in the short time of its existence, the principal international forum for addressing science and policy on climate change.

I am pleased to report that last week in Geneva the steering committee of the IPCC Response Strategies Working Group (RSWG) adopted a workplan to examine a range of potential measures to implement response strategies to climate change, including: legal measures and processes, technology transfer and development, financial measures, public education and information, and economic (market) measures. The full range of these issues, and parallel consideration of them, is of special interest to developing countries. With regard to "legal" measures, the steering committee will examine both existing and new legal processes, including the elements of a possible framework convention on climate change.

The United States invites all members of UNEP and WMO to attend a special meeting of the RSWG during the first week in October to discuss these potential implementation measures. Relevant international organizations will be invited as observers. Participants are encouraged to submit discussion papers in advance on each of the five implementation issues. The report of this meeting will be included in the report of the IPCC.

President Bush expects that these efforts in the IPCC and its RSWG will serve as the basis for formal negotiations on the establishment of a framework convention on global climate. To that end, the United States has tabled a proposed resolution for consideration by this body.

Since greenhouse gas emissions result from many human activities—fossil energy use, agricultural practices, deforestation—proposed solutions must come from new and innovative application of science and technology, available in the marketplace at a reasonable cost, to support economic development. The greenhouse problem could, if properly viewed, present the world community with an opportunity for a global renaissance in applied technology not seen since the advent of the Industrial Revolution.

As a part of such a renaissance, industrialized countries can help address the problems of acid rain, urban ozone, and other regional air quality problems by enhanced efficiency in energy use—and help reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the bargain.

The use of energy-efficient and low-pollution technologies can also yield significant economic benefits for all countries, including developing countries. Improvements in energy efficiency can reduce capital requirements and enhance long-term economic development. Low-pollution technologies can reduce environmental costs, while promoting sustainable development. Efforts to promote reforestation, together with improved energy efficiency and reduction in pollution, could provide long-run economic savings and environmental benefits—and further limit emissions of greenhouse gases.

Let me now share with you a few actions we have undertaken at home. In March, President Bush announced that we will seek from the U.S. Congress authority to prohibit all exports of hazardous waste from the United States, unless there is a bilateral agreement with the receiving country to ensure that the exported waste will be properly managed.

This change in American law will help my country control hazardous waste exports and will protect other countries against potential damage from our wastes. This action is part of our President's commitments to an effective global scheme for the control of transboundary movements of hazardous waste, and we are, of course, now also giving the newly adopted UNEP convention serious and thorough review.

We will also further strengthen our enforcement of domestic environmental laws; we will demand criminal sanctions where appropriate; we will seek substantial civil penalties to make polluters pay for the damage they have caused. We are committed to the preservation of America's fragile ecosystems. For example, the President has set a goal of no overall net loss of America's precious remaining wetlands.

The Administration will soon submit to the Congress a proposal for reauthorization of our Clean Air Act. It is premature to discuss the bill's details, but I can say that the United States will take further actions to reduce the effects of acid rain, ground-level ozone, and air toxics.

Finally, as a global community, our first priority should be preventing pollution before it occurs. The United States is working with other countries to find ways to limit pollution. Working together, we have much to accomplish. The United States looks forward to the discussions held in this forum. I appreciate the opportunity to be with you this week to discuss our common environmental concerns. ■